



**"...still they continue teaching."**

### **Dean Brooks**

Teaching and learning in war means conflict and disaster and this is what has become my profession. Almost seven years ago, I left the classroom to embark upon a new journey which is the management of emergency and development education programs. This path has led me to countries caught in turmoil from Eastern Europe, East and West Africa and Asia. Presently, I find myself in the northern corner of Uganda working with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to implement emergency education interventions, which in the past two years has reached more than 170 schools and 1,300 teachers. At the moment, we are implementing teacher training programs, providing intensive time and instruction on human rights, gender equity, child-focused learning environments, participatory learning methodologies and methods that can be utilized in the teaching of reading and writing. (This is an addition to the school construction, school agriculture, and school feeding projects that we support throughout this region). Despite the fact that often I find myself both in roles as manager and administrator, I seek out time to spend with teachers, visiting them in their schools to facilitate teacher training sessions when possible. And it is in these times that a question has begun to develop, an inquiry into the meaning of learning and teaching; how even in dire circumstances still, schools are valued and still, teachers teach.

It is another hot afternoon, being the dry season in this isolated northern township of Kitgum, Uganda. It's been several weeks without running water or electricity. But the rains will soon come and the Acholi people who live here have begun to prepare their land (at least the little land accessible and in close proximity to the Internally Displaced Camps where most of this region has now converged; moving more than a few kilometers from these sites would put them at risk). There is much work to be done, but once again I find myself standing before a crowd of more than 100 teachers who have come to spend their weekend to learn about the reading and writing process. There are no books in the schools I've visited; and so today, I'm focusing on teaching them how to make an eight-page mini-book as well as the Ugandan Sign Language Alphabet (a tactile method to learn the alphabet for all children). I take a moment to scan the room and watch the teachers work, noting those teachers who catch my eye, who seem to communicate this sense of understanding exactly what I am talking about -- I am spurred onwards in the lesson as a result. I often refer to this phenomenon as a "spark in their eyes;" it feels intuitive and as if a "connection" has taken place. On this particular afternoon, a quiet woman sits near the front of the room and watches the demonstration with in earnest. After class, this woman who is named Agnes, comes to talk with me and begins to explain her concerns for the many deaf children in her community who have never learned sign language nor attended school. She cares about making a change for the better in the lives of these children.

It was due to the advocacy of Agnes and other teachers that we were able in subsequent weeks to provide a more intensive training on Ugandan Sign Language that involved bringing in experts from the Ugandan Association of the Deaf. As well, meeting Agnes brought me back to my curiosity about the motivation behind teaching in these difficult circumstances, and I decided that taking time to listen to what she had to say may also provide me with a chance to learn an important lesson as well – understanding what it was that kept her teaching through all these years of conflict, and why teachers persist in their practice, even though at times they place themselves at great risk (the simple act of commuting to the school is dangerous). These questions have important implications for all teachers. By beginning to understand we are better able to reflect on our motivations and perhaps find the inspiration needed at different junctures in our teaching lives.

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On another warm afternoon when the rains had started their seasonal visit, Agnes agreed to sit down and talk with me about her life and teaching.



Adwar Florence Agnes used to live in Cam Cam Village. Cam Cam is located in Kitgum District at the far north of Uganda, on the border of South Sudan. It is an area that has been subject to frequent attacks, abductions, and violence inflicted by the Lord's Resistance Army for the past 20 years. Because of the insecurity that continues on a daily basis (attacks upon the civilian population and even attacks on schools), her school had to move to the Kitgum Township (the district's center for trade and government—where there was greater military presence to protect the population at large). It is here that the school found shelter within an existing school and merged schools while

trying to maintain their original school's identity.

This year, Agnes turned 50. She has been teaching since 1976; it is this year in fact that marks her 30th year of teaching. Throughout this tenure she has taught in a number of districts in Northern Uganda and it was in Kitgum District more than 20 years ago that she finally settled. She began her training to become a teacher at the age of 16 and studied for four years in a teacher's college. Later on she continued her studies in education and spent an additional two years to gain further qualifications in education. When asked about her teaching Agnes says:

Usually, I'm fond of teaching language along with Physical Education [English is a second language for many students in the region, *Luo* being their first language]. I also like to teach arts and crafts and music. Now, I'm teaching language...basic reading, arts and crafts and I'm the school counselor. At the moment I'm teaching the first year of primary school along with children in their second year of primary school.

After talking with Agnes, I visited her school. Passing through the broken, metal gate of the school compound I walk into the center of a u-shaped, concrete structure which houses eight classrooms, and I see hundreds of children roaming around on their break. Soon thereafter, one boy takes a stick and begins to pound the metal rim of a tire as a bell to signal that it is time to return to class. This week there are exams scheduled and the former school yard bustling with play comes to a quiet stillness as the children vacate the dusty courtyard and file into classrooms (many missing doors and windows) to sit on the concrete floor. There are no desks, the chalkboard paint that once covered the makeshift chalkboard has long since worn away. When I ask why there are no desks I am told that it is because if there were desks then there would not be enough space for all the children; indeed, most classrooms I've visited here in northern Uganda have more than 100 children in each class. I walk along the side of the classrooms and visit the counseling office where Agnes meets with students when she is not teaching. Agnes has taken steps to decorate the room with bright posters and she's placed matting on the floor to cover the gray concrete. As you walk into the room the first poster you see depicts children in different situations and in the center of the pictures is the phrase, "Care for Children; Say No to Abuse." As I tour the school, I am told that during the night hours the school is used as a safe haven for "night commuters," meaning hundreds of children and adults sleep there each night and have been doing so for many years. I spoke with Agnes about the environment in which she taught and how she came to be where she now was:

In my class, unfortunately we don't have doors and there are no windows. It is just open air, so what I do is put charts and drawings that I use for teaching on the walls and then I move them after the class. We are in a displaced school. This is because of the rebel activities, some of our pupils have been abducted by the rebels. The rebels used to come to our village and abduct the children from their homes so we decided we would move the school into town, since our village is about five km away.

Before we moved, one day the rebels came to a place near our school. When they arrived they broke in and shot one boy and a man who was wounded. After this incident we decided to move the school to where it is now. There are 700 children in our school now. All of these children are from our village and there are a few

children who attend the school from town. My students are between eight and thirteen years old. Most of the older students are in the second year of primary school.

There are about 115 children in my classroom. And the children sit on the floor since there are no desks. It's a concrete floor. We keep the floors clean by mopping on the weekends. We have a chalkboard, but it is difficult to write on since it probably needs new paint.

Teaching in Northern Uganda is challenging considering the numerous obstacles and constraints that teachers must face on a daily basis, let alone the fact that they live in a war zone, constantly at risk of cross-fire. I asked Agnes to take me through a typical day so as to better understand what challenges she faces and mainly to get a sense of a day in the life of a teacher in northern Uganda:

I enter the school in the morning; I usually arrive around 8 a.m. My first class starts at 8:30. This is second year students, I teach basic reading and writing at this time. After this class I go to prepare my lessons or I go to the counseling room. Whenever pupils have problems they come to talk with me and I provide counseling. I continue this until break time which is at 10:30 and we have a 20 minute break. This is when the children come out to play. At this time I have a class with first year students on art & crafts. This is a 30 minute class. Lunch time is from 12:50 – 2:30. Usually we don't take lunch and the children take this time to play since their homes are so far from the school. From 11:30 to 2:30, I provide counseling for students. At 2:30 I teach students in the 7th year of primary school arts & crafts. At 3:30 the children clean the school, for example they sweep the compound. We rotate duties and assist each other in overseeing the cleaning of the school. The cleaning is done every day and this continues for 30 minutes. Afterwards, the children play games until 5 p.m. Sometimes we go beyond 5 p.m. depending on the activities. Most of the time, children return to their homes between 5 and 5:30. Usually, the students and I leave together. Once they start walking home I ride my bike home.

It is difficult not to notice Agnes's kind eyes and how keenly she listens and observes. It is clear how much she cares for the children she teaches. She is both a counselor and teacher in her school and describes her skills in supporting the children and school environment:

Many of the children are discouraged, for example like girls who are bothered by the teachers or boys. When the girls are scolded they talk about leaving the school. Usually, I counsel them and after that I talk with their teachers and counsel the teachers too. I then talk with the students and this is one way I work to keep the girls attending school. Sometimes, there are children who have lost their parents and they don't have school supplies, or they have problems with their foster families...so they report to me and I counsel them and let them know that if they study hard and keep working they will find some peace and not face the same suffering. I like to cite examples of my own life, I'm a female teacher and I lost my husband, but still I can pay the school fees for my children. When you study hard you are able to keep your children and the family at large. Sometimes I cite examples of working ladies and so they see the benefit of staying in school. It's the same for boys; I talk to them about the same.

I train Girl Guides. I train them on the moral behavior and Girl Guide activities such as how to save themselves from danger. For example, I tell them if they see someone coming and explain that if there is no where to go, they can tie a rope around a stone and throw it up and then climb to safety. And also to acquaint themselves to problems, whenever they are danger they have to overcome their problems. When work is given to them, they have to try and accept the work even though it is difficult. That's why whenever we ask them to wash the latrine, I demonstrate myself, and I work with them, so they see that if the teacher can do the cleaning so can they.

I also help the school by teaching arts, crafts and handicrafts so they can survive in the future on their own. I teach them to make winnowers and baskets which are used to clean the millet. I teach them how to draw so they can be artists in their future.

Working in northern Uganda in a position where I regularly meet with teachers, I am continually amazed at the resilience of teachers and their dedication to teaching. Many state that they teach to earn a living; but financial gain alone is not the real reason behind their dedication to the field. At this time, teachers are paid monthly 150,000 Ugandan Shillings (approximately 75 USD monthly); it is expected that there will be an increase in teacher salaries this year to 200,000 Ugandan Shillings. I asked Agnes to explain why she has taught for 30 years and continues to do so:

I teach in order to survive and pay the school fees of my children. If I don't work I won't be able to pay fees and not be able to maintain myself.

I'm approaching 'old years' now and I fight some pains. I like teaching that's why I joined. Of course I like working with children, this is why I teach the young ones. Since we are few teachers [referring to teacher shortages in Northern Uganda], I cannot leave the children. We depend upon the children; they are who will support us in the future.

I want to upgrade them to become good citizens of Uganda. I want to teach them so they will have self-reliance in the future and not have to rely on anybody. This will bring development in Uganda, because they are the people to bring development.

We want the children to be educated. We want them to be taught and teach them how to see the country into the future...if there are no studies then we are not preparing for the future...even though there is war the children want to come to school...when they hear a gunshot they run home, but the next day they come to school again...we just keep on like that.

Schools are necessary, because if you leave children alone they will just grow up [without education]...even though there are difficulties they have to persevere....

The conflict in northern Uganda has been long and continuous. This narrative as told by Agnes is by no means exceptional, if anything her story represents the shared experience of thousands of teachers. Agnes has seen and experienced this conflict first-hand. She describes the past 30 years as characterized by war, first under the administration of President Idi Amin where arrests and executions were commonplace. During this time, she talked of having to flee from different cities to find a place where she could be safe with her family. But even then she says the abductions of civilians and women and children was nothing like she has seen in the more recent past: "I continued to teach, but things were not as it is now. There were no abductions like you see now. School pupils were not disturbed and the people from the villages were not disturbed."

It was when Agnes moved to Kitgum, 20 years ago that the Lord's Resistance Army began to persecute the people in this region. She describes her own abduction in the following statement:

These times things are not normal. After I moved to Kitgum, the Kony business started – the rebel activities [referring to the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army]. So people became displaced. People were being killed and were cut into pieces or burned in their houses. So people started to flee, I too was arrested when I brought my child to the hospital in town and then when I went home the rebels arrested me. I had to stay with them for one day, and then I was rescued. I was working with my mother in the field when the rebels found us and they abducted me. When they first took me I was beaten. That was in 1987.

Agnes talks with a quiet reserve and she takes time to think through her words before speaking. Her words have a calming affect even when she speaks of the horrible situations she has faced. After a bit of reflection, she goes on to explain how her own resilience and perseverance in overcoming persecution has guided her in her work counseling children and youth:

I always say, "Be courageous. Anything can happen to you." Usually I tell them [students] whenever they are in problems and if they are asked, they are not to keep quiet, when they want to kill you -- your talk can make you survive...rather than accept things...always tell the truth...when they asked me why I went to town, I said I did go to town and it was because my child was sick.

I also give examples to the children of a lady...she was blind, her mother died, the

reverend who was taking care of her died, and even her next caretaker, and through all that she still learned and she was working as a teacher for the blind in the mission here.... Even though there are problems, still they must persevere...God will give them peace in the future.

It is sobering and profound to take these moments with Agnes and listen to her story, to hear of her concerns and the good that she believes will someday come to pass. It is women like Agnes who mean all the difference in the lives of countless children in the north of Uganda. Although the future is uncertain, she continues to teach, counsel and work closely with those in her community. The interview comes to a close with Agnes sharing what she would like for teachers outside of Uganda to understand and to know:

Teachers in Uganda are in difficult situations, but still they offer themselves because of the love they have for their pupils, their district and their country...in spite of the difficulties they offer themselves and don't think of their suffering...but for the goodness of the nation and the children.

Teachers who did not have this [ability] would not have continued to teach since this is a war-torn area and they would have run away. Because of the love the teachers have in their land they decided to teach...for life. In spite of seeing teachers give up or be killed, still they continue teaching.

These brief moments talking with Agnes and visiting her school have left me thinking about the fact that teaching and learning is so much more than books, classrooms and chalkboards. Seeing how little there is in terms of the "tools of the trade" and the dedication displayed by caring teachers, I am humbled. I begin to think back to the spark in her eyes and now realize that perhaps that gleam was a glimpse into something called "hope" -- something that Agnes has kept alive and continues to perpetuate in her life and in lives of those she has touched and continues to inspire through teaching (including me).

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